A Single Decision (Take Two)

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Aboard Invisible Hand, on that fateful day above Coruscant, Grievous makes a choice that causes a few little changes for the Separatists and Republic alike. [rewrite of a much older story]
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Chapter 15

"Chancellor, my ships could intercept the Separatists at Brentaal if they left right now," Admiral Salima, commanding officer of the Home Fleet, said. Frustration smoldered in her dark eyes, and the leather of her gloves creaked as she clenched her fists. "We have a one-in-a-million chance to destroy a *significant* part of the rebel fleet! At least ten percent of them, if not more!"

"She's right," Tarkin said quietly. But Amedda wouldn't listen. Grievous's attack those few weeks ago had scarred the civilians badly. *Woe to the Republic, that it should be burdened with such complacent leadership!* he thought.

"She is," agreed Bail Organa, much more forcefully. "Chancellor Amedda, we *need* to act! Inflicting a loss of this potential magnitude on the Separatists would shorten the war by a matter of months!" Bless his naive heart, the man was still trying. He might as well have been talking to a duracrete wall.

"They could go anywhere once they reach the Core," Amedda said, hands folded in front of him as he stared at the strategic holomap of the galaxy in front of him.

"We have very little information on the man leading this fleet," said Director Orlok of Republic Intelligence. "Not even enough to form a personality profile on him."

"What *do* we know?" Master Windu asked.

"We know his name is Helnurath," said Orlok, rubbing a thick finger along his bushy mustache. "He's a real piece of work, take a look." He brought up an image of Helnurath. The creature would have terrified a lesser man than Tarkin; he had wine-dark scaly skin rippling with muscle, horns and claws, and a huge pair of wings looming behind him.

"A Stenax?" asked Organa. "What's he doing off his home planet?"

Tarkin eyed the breastplate Helnurath was wearing. It was emblazoned with the Separatist hexagon, and bore many notches that seemed to resemble tally marks. A kill count, probably. *Typical alien savagery.* "Does it matter?" asked Tarkin.

"It might," Windu said. "I'm curious to know how a Stenax got so high up in the Separatist navy."

"We traced him back to Hutt Space," Orlok said. "Looks like he was some kind of slave-soldier to a Hutt lord, about fifteen years back. He disappeared on Terminus right before the Naboo incident, and then appeared again four years ago as a pirate operating out of Wild Space. The traitors on Raxus issued him a letter of marque when the war started. He was either really good or really bad at privateering because we have no idea what he's been up to between then and now. Maybe he sat in the sidelines until today, maybe he's been so covert we haven't noticed him." Orlok shrugged. "We'll definitely have a profile on him by the time this is over, though."

"We're dealing with a wild card," Salima sighed. "That's all the more reason to stop him at Brentaal with the Home Fleet! We can catch him there and end his little adventure before it goes any further!"

"I will not sacrifice the safety of the Core," Amedda declared. "It is my obligation to protect our constituents."

"There is a Republic outside the Core too, my lord," said Salima.

"They are not as important to the Senate."

Salima looked like she wanted to say something very uncouth. Orlok offered her a deathstick, but she declined. *This is a no-smoking facility,* Tarkin had half a mind to tell him.

"There are a lot of Separatist sympathizers on Brentaal," Windu said. "If this Helnurath makes contact with them, there might be trouble."

"There'll be even more trouble if we sit here and do nothing waiting for Renau to catch him," said Tarkin.

But Amedda would not be moved to action. Everyone except him watched the timer tick down, a visual representation of the window they had to catch Helnurath and his rogue Separatist armada at Brentaal closing. And finally, that timer hit 0, and even if they flew as fast as possible down the hyperlanes, the Home Fleet would not make it there before the enemy did. Admiral Salima glared at Amedda, who pretended not to notice. Governor Renau's 11th Fleet was hours and hours behind the Separatists, they'd never catch up unless something delayed them.

And then more bad news arrived.

One of Orlok's underlings arrived, and whispered something to him. All eyes in the room turned expectantly to him. Orlok scratched his bald head. "The communications grid on Raxus just went back up. Our agents are reporting planetary the droid army has reactivated."

"So much for the coup," Tarkin said.

"We've lost a major opportunity," Windu sighed.

"You think Grievous has pulled through?" asked Organa.

"If the droid army has reactivated, that means someone deactivated it in the first place, and I don't think Grievous would have been the one to do that," said Orlok. "This war isn't going to shorten by a minute."

"Bravo, bravo!" Eemon cheered, clapping as General Grievous's message cut out. "A thrilling conclusion to the treason of the corporate authorities!"

Kronaak leaned back on his command chair. "They didn't last until Raxus sunset," he said.

"This was a long day nonetheless," said Admiral Hithlu. The three of them were in a conference room on the coreship *Unlimited Projection,* anchored in an Utupau sinkhole, where until recently Grievous had made his headquarters. "I am relieved it ended with our General's victory."

"Obviously," said Kronaak. "Without him I doubt we'd win."

"I'm certain we would be doomed without Grievous," Eemon agreed. "Now, Admiral Hithlu, would you care to explain what you've cooked up with Rear Admiral Helnurath?"

Helnurath wasn't someone Kronaak had ever met, but he'd heard mentions of him a few times before. The Stenax warrior had cut his teeth as a pirate warlord in Wild Space before making his return to serve the Confederacy against the hated Republic. Why he hated the Republic, Kronaak had an idea. Helnurath too had been held in slavery in Hutt Space, while the Republic looked the other way. This, he could empathize with. Kronaak himself was itching to have a go at the Hutts, but the war simply hadn't allowed for it. Yet. He wondered if anyone in the Republic had ever *cooked up* a scheme to end the crimes of the Hutts, but had their hands tied by the chain of command.

"You remember Lok Durd, don't you?" Hithlu asked.

Eemon shook his head, but Kronaak knew that name.

"The fat Nemoidian," said Kronaak, clicking his claws. "Yes, I feared he would eat me."

"The very same," Hithlu said. "We have a stock of his defoliator weapons left over from the prototype production, before he did his live weapons test. They were sitting gathering dust on Serenno, I told Helnurath to take them. He's going to cause a bit of a crisis in the Core for us..." The Umbaran smiled, and wrung his hands together. "I admit, I have you to thank for this idea, Eemon. There are no civilians in total war."

"Well, I mean, there *are,* but..." Eemon paused, his bravado suddenly gone for a moment. "You told him to go after those contributing to the war effort, right?"

"Oh, of course, no need to worry," Hithlu said. "We're only targeting their war industries."

"That sounds fair to me," said Kronaak.

But Eemon looked troubled. He stroked his well-trimmed beard. "I suppose so," he said. "I was just remembering something that happened in our unification war."

"Something unpleasant?" asked Hithlu.

"There's total war, and then there's wanton murder. There's a line there, I don't want to cross it." Eemon glanced uncertainly between the two of them, seeming as young as he really was without his usual charismatic confidence.

"If Helnurath crosses any lines, it's on him," said Hithlu. "I wouldn't worry about it."

"As you say," said Eemon, with a small smile. He was quickly back to his usual self. "The entire Serenno theater is stripped of its warships, now. Losing Serenno itself would be a blow to morale, too. What are we going to do about that?"

"I'm more interested in how Helnurath is going to deal with the star dreadnoughts at Kuat," Konraak said. He brought up the last reconnaissance report on the heart of the Republic's industry. Three *Mandator-II* star dreadnoughts circled above the planet's artificial ring, where the great work of the shipyards were masked from public view. But through passive spyware infections and a variety of exotic spectrum cameras, Separatist spies had a reasonable idea of what was happening inside the ring. The new *Imperator*-class star destroyers had the entire Navy nervous, but they had yet to be deployed. That might be changing very soon.

"I've got Khwaramenes on it," said Hithlu. "That little Givin will have them dropping out of hyperspace right where they need to be."

"Oh, master, it's horrible!" A4-D whined, bringing his hands to his emotionless droid face. "What have they done to you?"

"They tested my skills as a warrior," Grievous said, from the table where his doctor had forced him to lie down. "And they did not find me lacking." The fact that he had the entire former Separatist Council, but for Wat Tambor and Poggle the Lesser, in custody more than made up for what damage he'd taken.

A-4D had come by shuttle to Raxus ahead of *Invisible Hand*, loaded full of medical gear and the rest of his two of them had taken over an entire ward of the Raxus Planetary Hospital University, and looking like Grievous did right now, no one had protested. His armor was more scorched black than bone-white, he was dented and scratched and cratered, hydraulic fluid leaked out from his frame like blood, and of course he was covered in actual blood from the enemies he'd slain. And no one seemed eager to confront the recently-betrayed leader of their nation.

"This will take days of work. And while you're down here, I'm fixing your lung issue." A4-D shook a mechanical finger at him. "We've put that off far too long, chasing around Sith legends and corporate treason. No more adventures! Especially not with *strays* like that *that!*"

"Excuse me?" the Jedi girl asked. Grievous had almost forgotten she was there.

"You heard me, stray," A-4D said, cringing as best a droid could. "Who knows what filthy diseases you've brought with you. How disgusting, a *female* in my presence! I'll have nightmares for months."

"Droids don't dream," Grievous said. "Enough."

"It'll be several hours before the shuttle returns with everything I need. Do you want me to make sure the stray hasn't contaminated anything?" A-4D asked.

"Call me stray one more time," the girl growled.

"Why is it here, anyway?" the doctor droid continued to question.

"I have her weapon," said Grievous, hitting A-4D on the head with the girl's lightsaber.

"Oh no! A jedi-!?"

"Quiet!" hissed Grievous, eyeing the distant entrance to the ward, beyond which the reporters lurked like carrion birds. "This one has defected. She could be a powerful tool against the Republic."

"And you actually trust it?" A-4D asked, incredulous.

"I could have killer your master like eight times today," the Jedi said. "I'm a girl, by the way, don't call me *it*."

"Oh, I know, dear," said A-4D, "but do you know what the chief resident at my first job used to say? *Women were the original mistake.*"

The girl glared at the droid, eyes narrowed. Grievous only chuckled, which sent him into the usual coughing fit. But until his magnaguards retrieved his weapons from wherever the Gossams hid them, he was keeping the girl's lightsaber in his hand. And because of that, she wasn't going anywhere.

"Ow!" the Jedi suddenly yelped. "What the hell was that for?"

"I needed a blood sample," A-4D said. "The Maker only knows where you've been."

"I'm going to cut your head off," the girl said.

"Believe me, a Jedi's already done that. And he was a lot more trouble for my master than you would be! Look at you, you're as scrawny as a Geonosian." The droid poked the girl in the ribs.

"Blame months of field rations," muttered the girl. She'd crossed her arms and started blushing, though. Grievous rolled his eyes. When he'd gone to fight the huk, they've lived off the land and never stopped moving. Everyone came back scrawny-looking. When the Republic's sanctions crippled his world, everyone hard starved, and they'd all looked much thinner than the Human girl. Grievous doubted she knew what true hunger was.

A-4D flitted around the room he'd set up, running his tests and forcing the Jedi girl to do this and that. "Have you been to Shumavar recently?" he asked.

"Yes, I spent five months there. Maybe six. It all kind of blurred together, by the end..." There was a dark look on her face.

"Well, you've picked up a local pest."

"Huh?" The Jedi girl blinked, staring blankly. "How is that possible? Our medical records said there was nothing like that there."

"Because you core-worlders don't know anything about the Outer Rim. These communities existed long before you brought your war out here, you know," A-4D said.

"I was born on Stalimur-"

"It's been six hundred years since the Shumavarans adapted to the microscopic eukaryote that lives in the planet's freshwater," the droid lectured on. "It used to cause something known as Tergen's Rot, which wasn't an illness but rather the symptoms of opportunistic infections only seen in those with immunodeficiency problems."

"Is it serious?" asked the girl, looking mildly worried.

"The eukaryote is merely annoying, but the opportunistic infections could be lethal. I will deal with both," A-4D said. "Aren't you glad I'm doing a medical check on her, master?"

"Do your job, droid," Grievous growled.

Apparently, if A-4D had discovered the pest, the Republic medical units had discovered it by now too. A hilarious epidemic caused by an obscure Outer Rim lifeform would not be happening, unfortunately. The clone troopers would all be back to perfect health in a few days, just like the girl. "If you've been feeling unfocused or tired lately, this is probably why," said A-4D.

"I think it's more than that," the girl said.

Yes, it is, Grievous agreed with her. She was doing a good job of putting on a tough face, but he could tell she was frightened and confused. This amused him, but if she was to make herself useful, she'd have to get over that. And he couldn't have her being a hungry weak little thing, either. He'd see to it that she received her proper nutritional intake aboard *Invisible Hand.* Only then could he begin enacting his plan to de-Jedi her. Admittedly this plan was only an inkling of an idea in his head. But Grievous was not blind; a Force-sensitive on his side that wasn't a neurotic darksider like Ventress or any other of Dooku's failed apprentices would be extremely useful.

Although, it remained to be seen if this girl wasn't neurotic too. She had that complex about killing people and doing 'bad' things. Force her to do something she didn't like, and... Well, that's how she'd ended up here in the first place. Grievous had to watch himself with this girl who was willing to cause such havoc rather than compromise her morality. Maybe it'd be better if he learned how to manipulate that morality. Yes, that'd be good. Grievous made sure his mental barrier was still up. Could she read other people's minds? That'd be useful too.

"I don't normally deal with organics, since the incident with the laser scalpel and the patient who wouldn't stop complaining," A-4D said, "but you're nine kilograms below the minimum healthy weight for a Human woman of your laughable height, suffering moderate malnutrition, and are showing symptoms of trauma-induced stress in your weak female psyche. Master, please cast this stray back-"

The girl lifted her hand and swiped A-4D off his feet, sending him clattering to the ground. "I warned you," she said.

"Master, please!" whined A-4D. "Don't let her abuse me like this!"

"You brought it on yourself," Grievous said.

"Siding with a Jedi? I never thought I'd see the day!"

"Watch it, droid."

"I'm an ex-Jedi, actually," the girl corrected. "They've expelled me."

At last, the magnaguards returned with Grievous's white cloak and all his lightsabers. He took one last look at the leaf scrollwork on the girl's lightsaber hilt, before handing it back to her. "As I said, if I did not win your blade in combat, I do not want it," he told her.

"I still don't completely trust you," she said back.

"I could have killed you as many times as you could have killed me," Grievous said.

"Yeah," agreed the girl. "What was that about the Sith, earlier?"

"Have you ever heard of Darth Sidious?" asked Grievous.

"No," said the girl. "Is that what your droid meant by Sith legends?"

"Perhaps," Grievous said. *So the Jedi didn't know the name of Dooku's master. At least the rank and file don't.* "We will speak of this aboard my ship later. I will summon you when I am ready. Tend to your affairs here."

"By your command, General," the girl muttered.

With the distraction gone, Grievous tuned in to his datalinks on the state of the war. Something was afoot in the Core, he found.

The Separatist congress had been released and sent to the hospital for check-ups, just in case. Several floors below Grievous, Esera found her friend. *Hopefully, she's still my friend,* Esera thought.

Lirka stared at Esera, fear, anger, admiration, awe, relief, and shame all mixed together on her face. And Esera could feel a bit of it too, but nothing nearly as strong as she'd felt from Grievous. "You look awful," the Sephi finally said.

"It's been a rough day," said Esera. She'd been avoiding any mirrors, but she could imagine her appearance. Grime and dust from her escapades through the Congress building, blood and sweat from the fight against the Corporate forces, and even some oil from the cyborg... Esera figured she was a mess.

"Thanks," Lirka said, after a while. "For doing what you did. We'd probably all be in chains and shipping off to Coruscant for execution right now if it wasn't for you."

"You helped me when I needed it, I helped you when you needed it. It's the Jedi way. Should be, the Jedi way." The very mention of that word made the Sephi girl flinch.

"I see," she said. Lirka pulled up her knees to her chin on the bed she sat on. "Are you going to kill me if I refuse to help you?"

"If you want, I'll leave this room and you'll never see me again," said Esera. There was a tightness in her throat as she waited for the Sephi to answer. She barely knew Lirka but she was the only friendly face on this whole planet right now.

"I... No, no, I don't want that... I still think you're a good person, Esera," Lirka said. "I guess I'm just having a bit of trouble, putting *good person* and *Jedi* together. You... the Jedi, I mean, have done nothing but harm to us. It's hard."

"I understand," Esera said. It hurt to know that her reputation was so bad in a significant part of the galaxy's eyes. But there was nothing she could do about it, except prove them wrong. Saving the entire Separatist movement from certain defeat was a good way to start, Esera supposed. "We're supposed to be peacekeepers. Guardians of justice for all. We've failed miserably at both. I'm not even a Jedi anymore, either, they expelled me from the Temple. But I can't really unlearn everything I was raised to believe."

"You shouldn't," said Lirka. "You're not like the others, or the one who killed our king. Maybe when this is all over, you can go back and fix things."

"That's nice to think," Esera murmured. *But I doubt it'll happen.* "So... are we good?"

"Yes, we are," said Lirka, with a little smile.

"Can I use your shower, then?"

The Sephi laughed. Esera was thankful beyond all belief that Lirka still trusted her enough to let her stay with her sister and she. They walked back to the Congress building, collected R8, and took Lirka's big silver landspeeder home. The behemoth would have never made the jump Grievous did earlier. The first thing she did was shower, and then put on the fresh clothes the Sephi gave her.

I've never worn a dress until today, Esera thought, as she joined the sisters for dinner. It was too long and too loose for her, but she *was* short and skinny, like that wretched droid A-4D had so kindly pointed out. She felt a little silly, but she kind of liked it too. Like a lot in her life right now, it was new and different. The only way she'd survive the coming days was to embrace such changes.

"Alright, Esera," Lirka said, once all three were seated. "Tell us everything that happened today."

"Why do I get the feeling I won't believe any of this?" asked Sirka.

"I don't even believe it myself," said Esera. And then she told them a slightly sanitized version of what she'd been doing since the morning's events. The Sephi were amazed, and just a little dazzled the Confederacy's savior was having dinner with them. Esera slept fourteen hours that night, and was haunted by dark and anxious dreams about what she'd done and intended to do.

"They're definitely headed for Kuat," said Admiral Salima, as the Separatist fleet's movement was plotted on a projected map of the Core. Tarkin gazed boredly at it, wishing something would happen already.

"Let them come!" boasted the life-size hologram of Governor Thichis Kuras, master of the Kutai system. "We'll send those faithless traitors to hell!"

Admiral Praji of the Fourth Sector Fleet was present too, hologram beaming in from Alderaan, where it was still in the depth of night. "Supreme Chancellor, I have a mobile force ready to reinforce Kuat immediately."

"Together with the Home Fleet and the Eleventh Sector Fleet, we have no less than four major task forces at our disposal," said Renau's hologram, who had been given the command to stop at Brentaal. "We could crush the Separatists at any time we chose... if we were allowed to do so."

"That's risky," Amedda said. "They have a lot of concentrated force."

"Our *Mandators* will crush anything that enters our system," Kuras said.

"Don't be so proud of your technological terrors," Master Windu warned him. "Intelligence and creativity always find ways to defeat brute force. Do not let your guard down."

"Thank you for the lesson, wise master," answered Kuras, giving him a smug look. "Do you have anything else you'd like to add? Maybe a magic spell that'll help us defeat the rebels?"

As much as Tarkin disliked the Jedi, he did not doubt their power was very real. To Windu's credit, he did not rise to the bait. He and Organa exchanged a tired look.

"We won't need magic to defeat them, if we're allowed to act," Praji stated.

"If they split their forces, we would need ships on hand to chase them," Amedda said to no one in particular. "We can't let Coruscant happen again."

"I agree," said Kuras. "Kuat is not a soft target like the capital. We can handle a mere thousand ships."

"Four thousand, actually," Salima said. "Almost everything from the Serenno theater."

Kuras fidgeted, but lost none of his bluster. "Kuat has been ready for this," he said. "We don't need help."

"I really wonder what kind of logistics line they're operating," said Praji. "We can barely keep our Outer Rim forces supplied adequately. How can they just take four thousand ships and... *go?*"

"Droids," Director Orlok said, stepping in from his smoke break. "Most of those ships don't even have organic crews. If any ships will be having trouble, they'll be locally-built indigenous designs, not the standard Confederate types."

"Don't legitimize them," said Salima, scowling. "Call them what they are."

"Fine, standard *Separatist* types," Orlok said, raising his hands. "They're built to operate alone for long periods of time. All that space we use to house our crews, they use for more fuel, more reactors, more machine shops, more storerooms... If there's one thing they do well, it's outings like this. Very cheap to operate compared to our own fleets. They have to be, they wouldn't be able to afford their navy otherwise."

"But a droid will always be outfought by a person," Windu said. "They sacrifice a lot for cheapness."

"I agree," Orlok said. "But the savings... I can see the appeal, for bureaucrats."

The room was quiet, as they watched the projected path of the rebel fleet. Praji's mobile force sat at Alderaan, waiting. Salima's Home Fleet sat at Coruscant, waiting. Renau's Eleventh Fleet sat at Brentaal, waiting. Kuras's sector defense forces sat at Kuat, waiting. And Supreme Chancellor Amedda sat at the head of the table in the situation room, waiting.

I hate waiting, Tarkin thought. The Separatists were taking longer than expected to arrive. They'd missed their estimated time of arrival by two hours. And then three. Tarkin thought it strange; the Separatist fleet had a very good navigator, judging by the ease of which they slipped in and out of mined systems, never a moment too late but never a moment too soon. And good intelligence, because they knew exactly where Republic minefields had been deployed in hyperspace. What were they up to?

Finally, the alarms on Kuras's end of the line went off.

"They're here. Action time!" he said, sounding more jumpy than confident. "If you excuse me, ladies and gentlemen..."

His hologram muted, and he began directing others not caught in the projector. The galaxy map switched to a three-dimensional model of the Kuat system. The holograms of Praji and Renau dimmed along with the situation room's lights, until Tarkin could hardly see the others. All focus was on the battle about to unfold.

At the center was the planet of Kuat, green and blue and ringed by the vast orbital shipyards. Other planets circled its star further out. Red arrows marked the Loyalist ships in-system, mostly clustered around Kuat itself. The three big arrows were obviously the dreadnoughts the Kuatis took such pride in.

The first blue arrows emerged from Hyperspace, rocketing in from the edge of the projection before rapidly slowing to realspace speeds. There were only a few hundred of them, several light-minutes out from Kuat. Not that it'd matter; hyperwave sensors all around the system triangulated their real-time positions regardless of the speed of light. Tarkin tuned the sound system in to the comms channel the Kuatis were using.

"*...Hold position,*" someone was saying, "*they're far out of effective turbolaser range. They're trying to bait us.*"

"*That's less than a quarter of their strength, it's a trap, do not engage.*"

"*Command, be advised we're detecting heavy jamming from this group.*"

"*Acknowledged. Ion drive radiation plume profiles match* Lucrehulk-*class and smaller ship types...*"

Minutes later, the bulk of the Separatist ships arrived, much closer to Kuat. *A trap, just like they thought,* Tarkin noted. *But there's still more to come.* He put his hand on his chin. The Separatist fleet navigator was *very* good, to have placed so many ships in right on top of the Kuatis.

"Director Orlok," he said quietly, "I think they've got a Givin in their service."

"I see the hand of Alzar Khwaramenes," Orlok said with a nod. "Graduated seventh in his class from Yag'Dhul's finest university, had a shot at entering the Body Calculus but spent six years working for the Techno Union merchant fleet instead, heavens know why."

"Perhaps he enjoys life on a starship," Tarkin said.

"When Yag'Dhul seceded, he signed on with the Confed- er, Separatist navy. He's worked his way up to commodore now, mostly through attrition." Orlok rubbed his mustache again. "Not much tactical sense, but he's good at plotting jumps, even for a Givin. He snuck in three convoys to Umbara before we secured high orbit." *Sneaked in,* Tarkin wanted to correct him. "Dropped them in a few hundred kilometers above the surface, they hit atmosphere before we even had time to shoot."

"Do you think he'll try something similar here?" asked Tarkin.

"I'll eat my boots if he doesn't," Orlok said.

Admiral Salima leaned in; Tarkin realized she'd been listening the whole time. "That must be what the remaining ships are waiting for. There's still a thousand ships unaccounted for, and sensors aren't picking up the profiles of any of their *Providence* carriers."

They watched the battle unfold. The Separatists outnumbered the Kuatis and Republic Navy ships in orbit, but they didn't outgun them. Helnurath, whoever he really was, soon was forced to pull his ships back as the gargantuan *Mandators* plowed into his lines, slow and inevitable as death itself.

"We've got them on the run already," Kuras reported, arms crossed with a smirk on his face.

"And what of that other group?" asked Windu.

"Master Jedi, leave this to the professionals," said the Governor of Kuat.

"Perhaps I'll ask the admirals, then," Windu said back, cool and calm as ever.

Tarkin's mouth twitched upwards and Organa laughed. *Sometimes, these Jedi aren't so bad,* Tarkin thought. *Sometimes.*

"Governor," Admiral Praji said, "Don't let them draw you off too far. There's still the carriers somewhere around."

"We have that in mind," Kuras said.

But the dreadnoughts were being drawn off. Every minute they went further from Kuat would mean another minute it'd take them to get back in case something happened. And dreadnoughts didn't turn on a button, either. Tarkin recalled that the *Mandator* could take up to three minutes to adjust its course by ninety degrees, even longer for a complete turn-around.

At last, the long-awaited final Separatist fleet arrived, dropping in to Kuat's orbit. There was a flurry of activity from the comms, as the Kuatis mobilized their reserve forces. They'd been waiting for this moment. In moments, the Separatist trick was neutered, effectively blocked from approaching the ring by orbital defenses and the guard fleet.

"So much for this attack!" Kuras said.

"That wasn't much," Renau noted.

"If Grievous was in charge, maybe that'd be it. But he's not." Orlok frowned. "There's going to be something more. Stay alert, Governor."

Kuras waved his hand dismissively. *I have a bad feeling about this,* Tarkin thought.

Right on cue, something more happened. The distant force suddenly vanished, and blinked into existence in the same moment, now somewhere else. They'd made a micro-jump into hyperspace, straight into low orbit! They were actually closer to the surface than the ring of shipyards now, inside the orbital defenses of the planet.

"Just like Umbara," Orlok muttered. "Well played, Khwaramenes."

"What the hell was that?" Kuras asked, eyes wide. "What did they just do?"

"*Command, we have a visual on the first group. There's the* Providences*, they altered their drive plumes to look like battleships,*" said a Kuati officer on the comms. So, that was what the jamming was for, the rebels were hiding their carriers in plain sight. Beyond visual range and with other sensors jammed, the Kuatis would only have radiation signatures to identify them with. What a clever trick!

"*Scramble all fighter and interceptor wings, we have craft leaving the carriers. They're headed for... the surface?*"

It was far too late to stop them. The Kuatis had been drawn off by the other two forces from where this third group appeared. They'd played right into the Separatist plan.

"What's on the surface to attack?" Salima wondered. "All the factories and yards are on the ring behind them... There's nothing down there but..."

"Farmland, mostly," said Praji. "The yards are too well-defended, but the surface isn't at all. What are they going to do, though? Burn some fields?"

The Separatist bombers were fast; they dived straight into the atmosphere before the Kuati V-wings and Z-95s could catch up to them. Half a minute later, and it was clear that they were indeed going to burn some fields. Hundreds of thousands of square kilometers of fields.

"Defoliator bombs?" Orlok asked to no one. "Lok Durd's been in prison for nearly three years now, where did they get those weapons?"

Kuras was too horrified to say anything, watching as visible swathes of his planet burned to ash in moments, consumed by the expanding rings of fire. Tarkin watched on. Thousands of people, maybe tens of thousands, were dying right now. But all that bothered him was the mess this was going to make for Kuat's production schedule.

"Sadly, that was the last of them," Hithlu's voice said, sounding as shady as the man looked.

"It was a worthy sacrifice," Grievous told him. At that moment, his body was disassembled, and all Grievous was, was a nervous system and bunch of organs floating in a bacta tank. A veritable army of medical droids attended him, undoing the damage Windu had inflicted on Coruscant. Neither Hithlu nor anyone else but A-4D and the medical droids knew this, though; Grievous was communicating solely by voice. "We will need to recover Lok Durd. I want more defoliators."

"Kuat will now have over a hundred million workers going hungry within several days," the high and clear voice of skull-face Khwaramenes said. "I estimate that new star destroyer production will be delayed at least a month by the time this is sorted out. And that's not mentioning the chaos we've inflicted on their logistics."

"Indeed, sir," boy Eemon agreed, sounding softer and smoother than the Givin. "The Republic was already straining to keep their far-flung fleets and armies in the Outer Rim supplied adequately. With problems on the home front taking away from that, they'll have to withdraw from less-important fronts or go without supplies."

"This is the break we've needed," crab-man Kronaak said. His voice was somewhere between gravelly and wet.

Grievous could hardly believe only a day had passed, but so much had changed. Twenty hours ago, he'd been waiting to hear about Congress's decision, and wondering how to get out of the mess the Outer Rim Sieges had put him in. Now, he was undisputed leader of the Confederacy, his foes had committed high treason and were now in his custody, and the pressure was on the Republic. Logistics pressure, at least. Grievous was no fool. Wars could be decided on supply lines. The Separatists, for all the attrition they were taking, at least had the vast merchant fleets of the commerce guilds at their disposal, the Republic had to build theirs up from nothing. When *Cataclysm* was finished, that'd be one more problem for their logistics...

"Sir, what is to become of Admiral Tuuk?" Hithlu asked. "Will he meet the traitor's fate?"

Grievous thought on the matter. Tuuk and Gunray had sided with the coup, so it seemed. But it was Tuuk and Gunray who had captured the other leaders and turned them over, and fed misinformation to the coup forces. Had they really been infiltrators? Or were they opportunists? Dofine would explain, as soon as Grievous was healthy again.

"We shall see," he said. The Umbaran was itching for a promotion; and he deserved one, for having so effectively rallied the Separatist forces during the chaos of the coup. Perhaps he was eyeing Tuuk's place as Grievous's right-hand officer.

"General," said crab-man Kronaak, "I have an idea I would like to share with you, regarding the Hutts."

"Later," Grievous told him. "Hithlu, I am leaving conduct of the war to you. I will be dealing with civilian affairs for the next few days. I trust you will be effective."

"Of course, sir," said Hithlu. He could almost see the Umbaran bowing his head.

Grievous looked at the data emerging on the Kuat strike. Helnurath certainly had executed his orders well. The casualty count was in the tens of thousands and growing; mostly civilian collateral damage, and mostly then because of secondary effects like smoke inhalation and ash fall. As far as Grievous was concerned, they were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. Hithlu and Helnurath had aimed for the vast farms that fed the workers of the military shipyards above. It was nothing personal.

In a way, it's justice, he thought. The Republic had starved his world for defending itself. Now they would get to feel the hunger for once.

Author's big note: Nani!? A second update in a month!? M-masaka! Oh, but it's true, reader, I have not been idle in the week of winter break and first two weeks of classes. Don't worry, I always get my academic obligations done before I touch this, but now that I'm over the hump of the coup arc I'm finally getting to use scenes I wrote months and even years ago (I don't write in strictly chronological order, one of the scenes you'll read next chapter was written all the way back in 2015). What does this mean for you? It means I've got first drafts of chapters 16, 17, and 18 ready for revision and chapter 19 is well under way. I'm aiming for a "one chapter every three weeks" for the next six months or so. I guarantee I can keep that schedule into spring.

On a story-related note, yes, even more characters we've never seen before. Can you spot the blatant expy?

Name:

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